Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

On the CHOICE *of* SUBJECTS *for* TRAGEDY.

By WILLIAM PRESTON, *Eſq; M.R.I.A.*

Read, Jan. 11th, 1800.

I PERCEIVE by the tendency of a late queſtion, which the Academy has thought fit to propound, on the ſubject of *German* literature, that ſome among you are not diſpoſed to bow with idolatrous humility before the golden calf of commonly received opinion. I ſhall therefore, without further preface, venture to lay before the Committee of Polite Literature, whom I beg leave to conſider as the natural guardians of the infant taſte and undirected and unſupported genius of this country, a few brief and haſty obſervations on a critical remark, which, as it appears in a literary journal of ſome credit and reſpectability, may paſs unqueſtioned by many readers. An implicit deference to the arbitrary ſentence of ſelf-erected authority is as incompatible with the intereſts of pure taſte, as it is ſubverſive of the ſpirit of true religion and true morality.

 THE

THE obſervation to which I allude is to this effect.—
‘ It has commonly been thought a judicious rule with reſpect
“ to tragedy, not to borrow the ſtory from recent events,
“ nor has any writer within our recollection tranſgreſſed this
“ law of limitation with impunity. Among other obvious
“ reaſons for the rule it may be obſerved, that it converts the
“ ſtage from an inſtrument of amuſement into a field of poli-
“ tical altercation, and tends to intereſt the paſſions on the
“ ſide of the popular judgment on any paſſing event, before
“ diligent enquiry and cool diſcuſſion can have determined
“ whether that judgment be conſonant to truth.”

I MUST obſerve in the outſet that the authors of this remark, in conſidering the ſtage only as a mere inſtrument of amuſement, ſeem to think too meanly of its functions and character. *Shakeſpeare* had juſter and higher notions of the dignity and importance of the ſtage, when he ſaid, “ Let the
“ players be well uſed, they are the abſtract and brief chro-
“ nicles of the time.—Its end,” ſpeaking of the ſtage, “ both at
“ the firſt and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror
“ up to nature, to ſhow virtue her own features, ſcorn her
“ own image, and the very age and body of the time his
“ form and preſſure.”

IN fact, thoſe who adopt the language and ſentiments of the remark which I have ſtated, ſeem to depend too much on the

the *green room* for their notions of dramatic compoſition, and to conſider rather what is likely to gain the ſanction of the Lord Chamberlains, or to paſs the ordeal of ſtage-repreſentation, than what is really eſtimable in itſelf, or conformable to the true ends of dramatic poetry, Obvious reaſons there may be of a prudential nature, and merely perſonal to the writers, which may deter the timid and cautious poet, whoſe thoughts are wholly bent on preſent emolument, from chuſing ſuch ſubjects as he conceives to be *periculoſæ plenum opus aleæ*, or which he ſuppoſes may incur the danger of being ſmothered at the threſhold of their paſſage into ſtage-exiſtence by the cautious delicacy of a licenſer, laudably awake and ſore to every thing like an alluſion to modern politics, or expoſed to the reſentment and malicious exertions of party, employed to procure the condemnation of a play for the political ſins of its author. Such prudential motives as theſe are not general principles of ſound criticiſm; theſe principles can only be drawn from the prevailing character and deſtination of dramatic poetry, as they are explained and taught by the beſt criticks antient and modern, and as they may be traced out in the writings of the great maſters of dramatic poetry.

THE preſent ſtate of the *Engliſh* ſtage ſhews that the public taſte has undergone a great and by no means favourable revolution,

volution, and the ephemeral productions, which ſucceſſively appear in its preſent hour of degradation, afford melancholy proofs that the favourable reception of the public is now no longer an unequivocal teſt of intrinſic merit. The prevailing rage for the immoral and extravagant productions of the *German* ſchool puts this aſſertion paſt all diſpute.

THERE is, indeed, one objection to the choice of ſubjects too near the preſent time, which has conſiderable weight, namely, that, in general, fiction muſt be employed for the purpoſe of fitting ſubjects taken from real life for dramatic repreſentation, and the mind naturally revolts againſt the uſe of fiction where the tranſactions are ſo recent that the public mind is in poſſeſſion of all their circumſtances; but if the events ſhould happen in themſelves to be ſo grand, ſo affecting, ſo full of truly intereſting incidents, as to furniſh a tragic fable ſufficiently detailed and diverſified, without the neceſſity of reſorting to invented circumſtances of embelliſhment or intereſt, the obſervation, *incredulus odi*, no longer applies, and our knowledge of the reality of the tranſaction, and the newneſs and freſhneſs of the concomitant emotions, which it has already excited, will encreaſe the intereſt and pathos.

THE Greek tragic writers, if their example has any weight, were fond of compoſing tragedies on political ſubjects. A reference

ference to queſtions of national importance, and topics that employed the public mind, was conſidered as an excellence, and the more directly a play was brought to bear on the preſent times, the more happy was the poet eſteemed in his choice of a ſubject. The *Perſæ* of *Æſchylus* was written by him and repreſented at *Athens* no long time after the battle of *Salamis*, which it celebrates, and at which the author was preſent. The *Supplices*, the *Heraclidæ*, and the *Oedipus Coloneus* were expreſsly written for the purpoſe of paying a compliment to the *Athenian* people. The conteſt for ſovereignty between the Greeks and Aſiatics was a topic, of which the poets of the former people, from *Homer* downwards, never loſt ſight. Among the tragedies of *Seneca* there is one entitled *Octavia*, of which the unfortunate daughter of *Meſſalina* and wife of *Nero* is the heroine. *Shakeſpeare*, who was a ſtranger to the rules of falſe criticiſm, and conſulted only nature and good ſenſe, did not find any thing in the recent date of a tranſaction which rendered it leſs proper, in his opinion, for becoming the ſubject of dramatic repreſentation. Many of his moſt popular plays are formed on the tranſactions of *Engliſh* hiſtory, particularly the conflicts between the houſes of *York* and *Lancaſter*, which were then freſh in the mind of every body. The tragedy of *Henry* the *eighth*, in which the ſovereign of *England* is a principal perſonage, and the divorce and death of his royal conſort are introduced, was brought on the

the ſtage very near the time when the events happened, and even while the daughter and ſucceſſor of that monarch was on the throne. The lines in the prophetic ſpeech of *Cranmer*, which are meant to convey a compliment to *James* the *firſt*, were inſerted after the death of *Elizabeth*, as appears from the aukward manner in which they are introduced and connected with the foregoing and ſubſequent lines. In the play of the *Midſummer Night's Dream*, there are lines, which in the opinion of the commentators, refer in a particular manner to the politics of the day:

> ——————— I ſat on a promontory
> And heard a mermaid on a *dolphin*'s back
> Uttering ſuch dulcet and harmonious breath,
> That the rude ſea grew civil at her ſong,
> And certain ſtars ſhot madly from their ſpheres
> To hear the ſea-maid's muſic.* &c. &c.

We find *Dryden* adapting the ſtory of the cruelties practiſed at *Amboyna* to the ſtage, at the time when the *Britiſh* court had determined on a rupture with the United States of *Holland*. *Rowe*'s fine play of *Tamerlane* was expreſsly written with a reference to the politics of the day, and under the perſonages of *Tamerlane* and the ferocious Turk it is well known, that the poet meant to exhibit the portraits of *William* the *third* and his ambitious rival and opponent *Lewis* the *fourteenth*. Even the

* See Dr. Warburton's notes on the whole paſſage.

the French ſtage, which has ever been conſidered as a model of guarded propriety, is not without examples of plays, written with a view to modern politics, or, at leaſt, with a deſign of influencing the public opinion. Even the correct, the decorous and modeſt *Racine* has done this, in his tragedy of *Eſther*. The *Mahomet* of *Voltaire* was compoſed with a deſign of diſcrediting fanatical enthuſiaſm, and hypocritical impoſition, on the part of the miniſters of religion, and ſuperſtitious and ferocious bigotry among their adherents. Theſe ideas are purſued in the *Alzire*, and ſimilar topics are diſplayed and enforced, by a writer of the preſent day, in the Tragedy of *Carl neuf ou L'Ecole des Rois.*

RECENT events and modern politics may be introduced on the Stage in three different Manners.—Modern events may be ſelected as the ſubjects of the Drama—Stories may be taken from ancient hiſtory and adapted, on the ſpur of the occaſion, for the expreſs purpoſe of preſenting parallels to recent events, or affording alluſions to modern politics; or, laſtly, occaſion is taken, to introduce reflections of that nature in particular paſſages: and of theſe different forms of reference the beſt writers ancient and modern, as I have ſaid, afford us examples.

BUT the juſtification of dramatic ſubjects, which have a political aſpect, does not reſt merely on example; they may be defended on principle. I will not go ſo far as to aſſert, with ſome critics, that the chief end of poetry is to inſtruct;—that *Homer*, for in-

ſtance, wrote his *Iliad*, on purpoſe, to teach mankind the miſchiefs of diſcord among princes; and his *Odyſſey* to prove to them the advantages of ſtaying at home and taking care of their families.—If, diſmiſſing theſe lofty notions of the end of tragedy, we admit with *Ariſtotle*, that its object and deſtination are only to afford that pleaſure which reſults from fictitious terror and pity—*την απο ελεε και φοβε δια μιμησεως ηδονην*,—in this point of view, the recent date of the tranſactions, the freſhneſs of the impreſſions they have excited, the conſciouſneſs of the reality of the incidents, of the diſtreſs and calamity of the ſufferers, for inſtance, will encreaſe the degree of pity and terror excited by the Drama, as well as the curioſity and intereſt of the ſpectators; and thus will augment the power in the ſtage of communicating pleaſure.

YET, though I may be ready to allow, that utility and inſtruction are not the prime or immediate end of poetry; few will deny, that it may and ought to be rendered uſeful. It ſeems to be a certain narrowneſs of mind, which would debaſe poetry to the humble province, of merely amuſing a vacant hour. It ſeems to be the general opinion of critics, that every perfect Drama ought to have a particular moral, and that by how much the more important and comprehenſive this moral, by ſo much the greater is its excellence. Now, what are politics, truly underſtood, but morality enobled and extended—the morality of

of communities and ſtates?—The public morality differs from the private only in ſuperior comprehenſiveneſs, utility and dignity. The political, therefore, is the more excellent moral, and the merit of inculcating it is greater, inaſmuch as the reformation of a whole people is more important than that of a ſingle private perſon. In my mind, therefore, we might as well reprobate a dramatic performance for conveying a moral, as for bearing an application to modern politics.

It is ſaid, that political Dramas "tend to intereſt the paſſions on the ſide of the popular judgment, on any paſſing event"—be it ſo—if the popular judgment be right, why ſhould not the paſſions be intereſted in its favour? and may not the paſſions, in the hands of a judicious and virtuous writer, become the means of rectifying the popular judgment? The conduct of human agents is ſeldom governed by pure, unimpaſſioned, abſtracted reaſoning; they act, and are acted on, through the medium of their paſſions; and the great care of the moraliſt and the legiſlator is to give a juſt and uſeful bias to the paſſions of men. We find, that even the Chriſtian religion, in its precepts as well as its ſanctions, applies not leſs to the paſſions, than to the reaſon of men. If the ſtage can be made ancillary to the great end of morality, it becomes a moſt important inſtrument in the hands of government. We find that, among the *Athenians*, the theatre engaged no ſmall ſhare of the public attention, anxiety and protection; it was conſidered in the moſt important light, and even reputed a part of the eſtabliſhment of the ſtate. The

 French

French government, ſince the revolution, has ſhown an equal care of the theatre. The ſtage is one among various avenues to the public mind; and on the ſame principles on which the Stage is interdicted from meddling with modern politics, the Preſs, in general, might be prohibited from entertaining ſuch topics; ſince their diſcuſſion may tend to intereſt the paſſions on the ſide of the popular judgment on any paſſing event. The genius of a free government requires, that every mode and form of addreſſing the public feelings, and enlightening the public mind, ſhould not only be permitted, but encouraged; provided they confine themſelves within the bounds of decorum and moderation. Indeed where an arbitrary *deſpotiſm* prevails, where the government is every thing, the people nothing, there popular opinion has no weight or place, and popular feeling muſt be extinguiſhed. In ſuch a ſtate of ſociety, the ſtage muſt indeed forbear to glance at the politics of the day, and content itſelf with being a mere inſtrument of amuſement.

WHAT I have hitherto ſaid applies peculiarly to Tragedy, but the ſame reaſoning will hold good with regard to the choice of modern incidents and characters from real life, as ſubjects of diſplay for the comic Muſe. Tradition informs us, that ſuch has been the practice of the beſt writers for the comic ſtage; and it is obvious, that the pleaſure reſulting from the drama will be heightened by our knowledge of the perſonages deſignated, and the conſciouſneſs that the portraits which it exhibits are not only

only well painted, but alſo juſt likeneſſes. We experience an additional and peculiar pleaſure, reſulting from our compariſon of the copy with the original, while we trace out the features of reſemblance. It may be ſaid, that ſuch a deſignation of perſons will give pain to the individuals, who are ſingled out and expoſed to public notice;—I reply, that in moſt caſes it is ſo much the better—it is not often practicable to make the virtuous and the reſpectable ridiculous—people can only become the object of contempt and laughter through their own follies, extravagancies and vices—the fooliſh and the vicious invite and deſerve correction; and the comic Muſe is in her right place and function, when ſhe inflicts it with the rod of ſatire. She is then aſſiſting the magiſtrate in the reformation of the public morals, by the chaſtiſement of offenders againſt virtue, good order and decorum.